

Fin de siècle – escaping the ideal

Queen Victoria reigned for almost 65 years and within that time saw immense and profound change in the country and its output, including the creative output of society. Britain experienced the industrial revolution and this fundamentally shifted society's dynamics. There was extensive social mobility as masses moved to the burgeoning cities of Britain such as London, Birmingham and Manchester and where in the space of a few years populations increased by as much as 60%. And it is the result of this massive upheaval which I want to explore today.

It is no surprise that this social change was reflected in the literature of the time, indeed social instability is frequently the catalyst for fantastic creativity and the Victorian era was no different. It is however the end of this period that I am going to focus on and the issues and literature surrounding the turn of the century or the fin de siècle and specifically the emergence of feminist writing; or rather writing by women who felt that there was no other outlet for their feelings of fear, redundancy and frustration.

During the latter part of the century women gradually gained the changes to their social status that had long been campaigned for and which lead to the empowered situation women finds themselves in today. Sir Walter Besant, a literary critic, historian and novelist of the time said that the drive for independence produced an extraordinary change in the status of women in the late Victorian period and that 'women emerged as major literary artists' naming the Brontes and George Eliot as examples.

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However, not all felt as Besant did and many men and women felt that the emergence of this new, expressive woman was threatening to the stable and well established patriarchal system that had characterised Victoria's reign. For clarification the writers and women activists that are referred to are from a select demographic and although their efforts and suffering ultimately affected the many it should not be thought that their lifestyle was representative of the masses of women in Victorian Britain.

In 1854 Coventry Patmore published his narrative poem, 'The Angel in the House' which was purportedly written about his own wife and elucidated the exact characteristics desired in the ideal Victorian woman. The Angel was passive and powerless, charming and graceful, sympathetic and self-sacrificing, but above all—pure. His poem advocated the benefits of the woman remaining in the home and expelling her energies in fulfilling every need of her husband and presenting themselves as thoroughly respectable to the world at large. This extract advocates the lengths to which a woman should go to, to support and love her husband, suppressing all individual needs to satiate her master's. Although initially very much focused on the middle classes as the century progressed this model pervaded all levels of Victorian society as an ideal.

The 'ideal' Victorian woman however, remained only achievable for the upper middle classes and before marriage was innocent and sexually ignorant but with an innate familial and maternal affection. Once married the ideal woman did not work apart from charitable acts and endeavours as servants were employed and even when children arrived the maternal role would only be required at set times. Any social and intellectual growth was

confined to family and close friends and her status was wholly dependent upon the economic position of firstly her father and then once married her husband. Moreover the effects of this kind of subordination are illustrated in this quote by Sarah Ellis who wrote numerous very popular books during the time on ways in which women; mothers and daughters should conduct themselves both privately and publically.

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This ideal, if achieved, led to many women feeling redundant; with nothing to do – all jobs being removed and so therefore their sense of worth was reduced. Indeed Florence Nightingale purportedly took to her nursing projects to overcome this feeling of uselessness.

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The debates that resulted were gathered under the title the 'Woman Question'. Some condemned the increase in industrial employment as this had led to many women being employed but in poorly paid jobs indeed in the 1851 census a quarter of England's female population were in work. At least they didn't suffer from the boredom and frustration associated with the enforced excessive leisure time of the upper middle classes. Indeed many were forced into prostitution because of their meagre wages or lack of work and the resultant public health issues led to the Contagious Diseases Act which allowed prostitutes to be arrested and checked for venereal diseases, if found infected they could be forcibly confined in hospital for up to a year. There was no similar treatment of male clients, a situation which led to considerable condemnation of the Act as unfair and unjust.

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The fight for women's rights was primarily concerned with the following issues. gaining access to higher education, it was during the 1870s that women were first able to gain degrees, property as until the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 women were unable to retain and control their earned income or own property, employment and gaining better wages and choice of job and ultimately suffrage. It was in this period that the movement for women's suffrage began but it wasn't until 1918 that selected women gained the vote.

This Woman Question was reflected in the growing number of single women of marriageable age that were of concern – William Rathbone a industrialist and writer of the age suggested that without action these women would be left to a 'life of celibacy, struggle and privation (a lack of the basic comforts of life)' he proposed the systematic shipment of the women to the new colonies where they would be very much in demand. These women were not however working class women but educated and liberal women and it was these women that began to speak or more accurately 'write' out about their experiences and become known as the 'New Woman' .

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The New Woman questioned paternalistic society and the supposed bliss of the traditional Victorian marriage. It was coined by the writer Sarah Grand in 1894 and became a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, a representation that departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman – intelligent, educated, independent and self-supporting.

The New Women characters in late Victorian fiction expressed dissatisfaction with the position of women in marriage and society; the novels featured rebellious and non-conformist whose representation encouraged public debate about gender relations, a previously taboo subject. These were heroines who fought against the traditional male perception of woman as 'Angel in the House' and the old codes of morality and conduct.

The New Woman figure anticipated feminist writing of the twentieth century and was attacked for dealing frankly with sex, marriage as well as women's desire for independence and fulfilment, which completely opposed the idea that home, was women's only sphere.

Protagonists such as Charlotte Brontë's eponymous heroine Shirley and Elizabeth Gaskell's Margaret Hale from 'North and South' although not utterly rejecting marriage did openly criticise the traditional Victorian version of marriage as masculine sexual privilege, female sexual ignorance and conditions that tolerated marital rape, compulsory or enforced motherhood and most prevalent the double standards of sexual morality with its repellent side effects of venereal disease and children with congenital syphilis.

Another effect of the stresses of living in this age of restraint and repression was that women were frequently were diagnosed with suffering from hysteria a term derived from the Greek word 'hystera' which means womb suggesting that the following symptoms were only applicable to women and were therefore an integral part of any woman's physiology. Symptoms could consist of faintness, nervousness, sexual desire, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in abdomen, muscle spasm, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, and "a tendency to cause trouble". It was a purely feminine condition, only

diagnosed about women and functioned as a convenient 'catchall' for any emotional or psychological divergence from the Victorian ideal.

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A seminal book on Victorian literature and a feminist's perspective on it 'The Madwoman in the Attic' suggests that 'over and over again in these novels, the woman labelled as mad is someone who has not accepted her socially established position in a culture that wants to subordinate her.' The title makes reference to the first wife of Mr Rochester in 'Jane Eyre' the story of a young governess struggling with her internal feelings and social pressures and who is terrorised by the ever present, but hidden figure from Rochester's past. This dismissal of the effect of confinement and restraint is a common theme in late Victorian literature.

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In 1892 an American writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a short story called, 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. This story covers the deterioration of the narrator as she suffers from a psychological disorder exacerbated by her controlled confinement implemented by her loving doctor husband. A house is rented for the summer and the wife, our narrator complains to her husband that the pattern in the yellow wallpaper conceals a woman that is seeking to break free from the 'sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.' ultimately resulting in the wife appearing to go mad.

'...and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?’

The yellow wallpaper functions as a metaphor for the wife’s increasingly repressed state of mind due to her enforced lack of activity and her desire to break free from her husband’s control. Finally she literally rips the wallpaper off the walls and locks the husband out of room. The use of imagery is not complex but did enable issues to be addressed and debates to take place. The story became important in the emerging feminist literature canon and blatantly features a character trying to escape the pressures of the ideal Victorian ideal. In other Victorian novels the issues explained are not as apparent but are nonetheless underlying themes being explored. One such novel is ‘Dracula’.

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In this novel there are two main female characters, Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra who are friends and have connections with a band of men who ultimately fight and defeat (sorry for giving away the ending) Count Dracula. An exploration of the representation of their characters reveals their positioning as both angel and whore – the two common extremes of female roles in Victorian literature.

Mina Harker is the representation of the ideal Victorian women as even her weaknesses through the novel only serve to provide the men with opportunities to rescue her and therefore exert their superiority and control over her. She is middle class and her priority is

for the well-being of her fiancé, Jonathan Harker. She has intelligence but it is only used to serve the progress and success of the band of men and although she is taken by Dracula her reaction is appropriate 'her eyes were mad with terror' and the men are able to use the resultant connection she has with the count to seek him out and destroy him. A role that she is wholly compliant with indeed she feels that her life would be meaningless without it 'Oh! If I could only help at all.' Maybe most telling for the modern feminist reader she openly denigrates the 'New Woman' for her silliness. 'I believe we should have shocked the 'New Woman with our appetites, bless them'

Lucy Westenra however represents a wholly different type of woman – she is proposed to by 3 different men in the opening chapters of the book and reference to her is heavily based on her appearance with a leaning towards exciting both the characters in the novel and potentially readers of the time. However, she is presented as sweet and innocent by the male of the book the critical reader can easily see her that Lucy is very close to falling into the category of fallen woman. She desires attention too much and is seemingly keen to cause pain and distress to her unrequited suitors. When she is finally vampirised by Dracula the description is barely covered sexual exploitation

'There was undoubtedly something, long and black, bending over the half-reclining white figure. I called in fright, 'Lucy! Lucy!' and something raised a head, and from where I was I could see a white face and red, gleaming eyes. Lucy did not answer, and I ran on to the entrance of the churchyard. . .I could see Lucy half reclining with her head lying over the

back of the seat. . .her lips were parted, and she was breathing – not softly, as usual with her, but in long, heavy gasps.'

Although the white figure may have connotations of purity the further descriptions of parted lips, reclining position and heavy breathing reveal a sensuality that is far from the ideal Victorian Woman explored earlier. Ultimately, Lucy is punished for her sensuality and subsequent acquiescence to the Count with her violent death at the hands of her fiancé. In doing so Stoker seems to suggest that her representation can once again be revered as a pure and virtuous beauty. Stoker achieves an ideal that many Victorian men must have wished they could also achieve of converting those women who threatened the 'status quo' of male dominance and strict roles.

The woman question and emerging 'new woman' pervaded all areas of Victorian society and was therefore explored and reflected in much literature of the time, whether directly as in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and other novels such as 'Shirley' by Charlotte Bronte and 'North and South' by Elizabeth Gaskell or indirectly as in the case of 'Dracula'. I find this period of time fascinating and always think that there is immense excitement, anticipation as well as plenty of angst in literature of the fin de siècle and this in turn perpetuates a common belief that the Victorian age was one of binary opposites. One explored here was the roles available for women as either Angel or Whore, another was the Individual versus society, the public and the private there are many and each is worthy of a lecture in itself. However, I would now hope that you feel in a position to go and explore some of the

literature mentioned with a greater understanding of the context from which it was produced and enjoy it as much as I have.